

# **New Internationalist**

The people, the ideas, the action in the fight for global justice

# **Rana Plaza and trade unions**



**New Internationalist  
Easier English**

**Ready Intermediate  
Lesson**

# This lesson:

- Quiz + infographic
- Reading
- Speaking
- Grammar practice
- Writing



# Quiz:

**1) Which country has the highest percentage of workers in a Trade Union?**

- a) Iceland                      b) Sweden                      c) Canada*

**2) There is no guarantee of workers' rights in:**

- a) Ghana and Chile              b) Kenya and the US              c) Belarus and Qatar*

**3) Which areas of the world have the least reliable working conditions?**

- a) S. Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa                      b) N. Africa and Latin America*  
*c) S.E.Asia and the Pacific*

**4) Which is the biggest international group of unions?:**

- a) PSI (Public Services International)      b) UNI (Union Network International)*  
*c) ITF (International Transport Workers Federation)*

**5) In Britain, what percentage of public sector workers are in a union?**

- a) 84%      b) 54%      c) 14%*

**6) In Britain, what percentage of private sector workers are in a union?**

- a) 84%      b) 54%      c) 14%*

**7) Union members in Britain earn, on average, how much more than non-union members per hour?:**    *a) 10p      b) £2      c) £5*

**8) In the US, what percentage of workers are in a union?:**

- a) about 3%   b) about 10%   c) about 40%*                      (see [infographic>>>>>](#))



- ◆ iPhone manufacturer Foxconn, which employs 1.2 million workers, says that 30% of its workers will be replaced by robots by 2025.
- ◆ In November 2015, Andy Haldane, chief economist at the Bank of England, told the House of Commons that 15 million British jobs could be lost to automation by 2030.
- ◆ Around 10% of US jobs involve driving a vehicle; with self-driving cars, most of these jobs could be lost.



**What's this story?**  
**When? Where?**  
**Why?**



**Who  
made  
my  
clothes?**



# Questions:

1/ Where was Rana Plaza?

2/ When did it happen?

3/ How many people died?

4/ Why?

5/ Which organization could help stop this happening again?

.....read the next slide to find out



# After Rana Plaza – part 1

The Rana Plaza factory collapsed in April 2013. 1,130 people died and 2,500 were injured. It was a very important time for women like Leeli. Leeli joined the union National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF), after she heard that workers went on strike and got money in compensation after a factory closed. She lives in a slum near her work, but her family (and her son who she can only see once a year) live in her village far away. She sends most of the money she earns to them.

There is a lot of exploitation in the clothes industry. After Rana Plaza and all the stories in the media, workers know about the exploitation. They are organizing and fighting back against the global fashion companies. But these companies say they don't have much power over basic rights of workers.

Think about, then find out  
from parts 2, 3 and 4:



- 1/ What's the problem with the new Bangladesh labour laws from July 2013?
- 2/ What do unions spend most of their time doing?
- 3/ What are some of the problems for women workers?
- 4/ What excuses do some fashion companies use to say they cannot control conditions for workers?
- 5/ What are 'yellow unions' and why are they a problem?



# After Rana Plaza – part 2

Workers know they first need the right to start unions – real change will come from the workers themselves, not fashion companies or their government. They also know that another Rana Plaza could happen tomorrow. Earlier this year, for example, there was a fire in a clothes factory in Dhaka. If it had been an hour later, the factory would have been full of 6,000 workers, who wouldn't have been able to escape.

Weeks after Rana Plaza, the fashion industry signed the Bangladesh Accord on Health and Safety. This was the first time the fashion industry accepted that it is responsible for factory conditions. But this agreement will end in 2018. It will only be a success if it can force companies to make the changes that will make factories safe in the next two years. The workers do not feel very optimistic. They say the only way they can improve conditions is by working together. On the day of the collapse, the workers in Rana Plaza had seen the cracks in the walls and rushed outside, but managers ordered them to go back to work. They did not have the power to refuse. If they had been in a union, maybe they would have been able to say no. A few hours later, they died inside the collapsed factory.

In July 2013, Bangladesh changed its labour laws. This made it much easier to start unions. But 30 per cent of the workers in a factory have to join a union before it can be official. It is very difficult to get the first 30 per cent of workers to join because people threaten them. In big factories, 30 per cent can be more than 1,000 workers. Also, people who try to get others to join a union often lose their jobs.

But in the last three years, many new unions have started and more workers are joining – but still only five per cent of workers are in unions. Local unions spend a lot of their time fighting to get the jobs back for workers who lose their jobs. Often, they use more energy protecting union leaders than fighting against forced overtime, unpaid wages, unsafe drinking water and too much pressure to reach production targets.

# After Rana Plaza – part 3

Most of the union representatives from factories are women. But the union leaders are mostly men. 85 per cent of clothes workers in Bangladesh are women, so they need more representation. Women have even more problems than men at work eg. conditions that affect their reproductive health. Also, employers treat women differently at work from men. 'Women always doing the difficult tasks,' explains one woman. 'The men do the packing and earn much more than us. But we work very hard, too.'

Trade unions need female leaders, but in Bangladesh, they need to fight against male control. Change is slow. They have training sessions on gender awareness and women's leadership. They also change union rules and restrict important leadership positions (eg. general secretary and president) to women only.

Women are actively fighting for their rights, even when this puts them in danger. Factory owners often pay gangs to violently beat, threaten to kill and sexually harass women who lead and join unions. Nearly all clothes worker women in the unions have suffered verbal abuse or physical or sexual assault. The women now accept all this risk as part of the fight.

# After Rana Plaza – part 4

After Rana Plaza, the world now knows about the very bad working conditions in the factories that make clothes for big global fashion companies. But these companies still try to stop workers joining unions – even though this is the best way to stop another factory collapse. They don't publish details of the factories in their supply chain, they stop local trade unions investigating working conditions and using the information to tell companies and their customers. A few companies (eg. H&M and Marks and Spencer) have published their supply chain information, but they have not shown how much production is in each factory. When someone finds abuse, the fashion company usually says that only a small percentage of their clothes come from there, so they don't have much control of working conditions.

Also there are 'yellow unions'- this makes their situation even more difficult. Factories or political parties start these 'yellow unions' and they stop workers from starting their own independent, representative unions by stopping workers fighting for their rights. These 'yellow unions' say they represent workers but they stop them doing collective action and make it difficult for them to know that it is possible to have a really representative union.

International union federations eg. IndustriALL need to check which unions they connect with. If they allow yellow unions to join, they do not support the independent trade unions in their fight to support workers. Yellow unions can be corrupt and are not good for the labour movement.

Alia, a woman who has worked very hard for women's rights with the NGWF, says they need solidarity. 'If we can't work together and fight together,' she says, 'we have nothing.' Workers really need to be able to join unions. They need the support and education. If clothes workers organize and get education through the unions, they could be very strong.



Grammar: put the **blue** words in order to make a correct sentence:

There was a fire  
in a clothes  
factory in Dhaka.  
If it had been an  
hour later, it .....

**of 6,000  
to escape  
the factory  
wouldn't have  
been full  
workers, who  
been able  
would have**



Complete the middle sentence with the  
**brown** words (in the right order!):

Rana Plaza managers  
ordered them to go back  
to work. They did not have  
the power to refuse. If .....

.....

.....

A few hours later, they  
died inside the collapsed  
factory.

**union, have**

**had would**

**been they**

**no to**

**say able**

**in been**

**they a**

**maybe**

# What's this grammar? What are the tenses? Why?

a) There was a fire in a clothes factory in Dhaka. **If it had been** an hour later, the factory **would have been** full of 6,000 workers, who **wouldn't have been able** to escape.

b) Rana Plaza managers ordered them to go back to work. They did not have the power to refuse. **If they had been** in a union, maybe they **would have been able to say** no. A few hours later, they died inside the collapsed factory.



The Rana Plaza disaster did happen, and many people died. Complete these sentences to create imaginary alternatives:

- 1/ If fashion companies had been concerned about working conditions 10 years ago, .....
- 2/ If all clothes workers in Bangladesh had been in a trade union, .....
- 3/ If people around the world hadn't started buying so many clothes, ....
- 4/ If labour hadn't been so cheap in Bangladesh, ...

now write 3 more 3<sup>rd</sup> conditional sentences about unions / Rana Plaza

# Writing

**Read** more about trade unions around the world

a) Easier English articles:

[https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php/Issue\\_495](https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php/Issue_495)

Or b) the more difficult, original articles:

<https://newint.org/issues/2016/09/01/trade-unions/>

**Write** an informal letter to a friend, persuading her/him to join a union.

